

The Problem of Christian Suffering, Part 1 – June 12th, 2011

- Today, and what will likely be for the next two weeks, I'll be doing a topical series, and break from our expositional teaching in Romans.
- I'm keenly aware that this may jam the gears of those who've become full on Bible Prophecy Addicts, but I trust that you'll make it through OK.
- There are a number of reasons for doing this, the chief of which is that, as of late, the Holy Spirit has been leading me in this direction.

- I would be disingenuous were I not to admit that I've been wrestling, struggling, and even anguishing over this, in my unwillingness to do this.
- If the truth be known, I would much rather continue with our weekly prophecy updates, and our study in Romans, because it would be easier.
- However, it doesn't seem that the Holy Spirit is going to let me get away with doing that. Actually, He's made it very clear that I'm to do this.

- It's for this reason that I've chosen to title this topical teaching; "The Problem of Christian Suffering," and today will be part one in this series.
- Before we go any further, I think I'd be grossly remiss were I not to preface such a delicate matter with a few qualifications and clarifications.
- First, I am in no way wanting to posture myself as the expert on the subject. There are many who are more qualified to tackle this touchy topic.

- Second, this teaching cannot be seen as exhaustive. What I mean by that is this; had I waited until I'd mastered it, I would never teach on it.
- Third, I owe a debt of gratitude to, and will be borrowing heavily from, those who have gone before me in their studying and teaching on this.
- Fourth, while I'll be addressing the topic of suffering extensively, I won't do it conventionally, in that my handling of it, will be done differently.

- Typically, when talking about tragedy and suffering, one is left with a sense of frustration resulting from the failed answers that are given.
- Usually, it's because the burdened pastor acquiesces to the simple solution, and pat or puny answer in the daunting task of defending God.
- The fear is that this good and loving God may somehow be found out as being unfair, unjust, or even worse, evil in His allowing of suffering.

"The greatest fear a Christian [and a pastor] has is not a personal fear, but the fear that his Hero won't get through, that God will not be able to clear His character."

Oswald Chambers, "Baffled to Fight Better," p. 23

"A certain type of [Christian or Pastoral] hypocrisy makes men hide what they feel, ...I do not know what to accept, but I am certain God will prove that He is just true and right, and I refuse to tell a lie in order to help Him out."

Oswald Chambers, "Baffled to Fight Better," p. 84

- This is why I want to handle the subject matter differently. There's no need to cower in the face of this, nor cover up for God because of this.
- I suppose you could say; God doesn't need me to defend Him or His goodness especially as it relates to what He's blamed for, or accused of.
- While the jury may still be out for some, I can testify that in the end, the verdict will come in and God will be found not guilty for our suffering.

- Another reason for this unconventional approach is, we've all heard the same answers, and the same scriptures, from well meaning teachers.
- Please don't misunderstand this to mean that I am disparaging them for doing that, I myself on many occasions have done the same thing.
- The problem is that this only goes so far because it's superficial. This is why I wish to paint the canvass with the brush of the supernatural.

"Every day that you get into your pulpit to speak, you are speaking to hurting people. The things they are facing are mind blowing. If you preach to hurting people you will never lack people to preach to. But, we are also hurting people and when we as pastors honestly reveal our own hurting then we can minister to people in a great way. But, if we are only trying to show ourselves as perfect examples, then people will tune us out."

Greg Laurie, "Calvary Chapel Senior Pastor's Conference" June 7th, 2011

- Lastly, we need a fresh approach because the enormity and intensity of suffering in these last days is not forgiving of Christianity's status quo.
- In other words, we can no longer get away with serving up, old warmed up left over's from yesterday, because of "the day," in which we live.
- The reason I say this, this way, is because the problems we're dealing with in this generation, are the likes of which we've never seen before.

- I would suggest to you that the wars of today are not like the wars of yesterday. Terminal illness and disease is increasing in our present day.
- Suffering financial loss in the days ahead has the propensity to propel us into a poverty we've never experienced in our lifetime of prosperity.
- Suffering persecution as Christians in an increasingly hostile world is not going to get better, it will wax worse by the day, until we're raptured.

- So, that's the introduction to this teaching! Sure hope you will come back next week! I know you will, and not for the reasons you might think.
- I believe that we are all hurting in one way or another. For some, it may be a prodigal son or daughter, for others, it's marriage or parenting.
- For you, it may be the death of a loved one, or the devastating diagnosis from a doctor. If the truth be known, you're hanging on by a thread.

- My prayer for this series is that we'll find a renewing of our hope, an invigorating of our faith, and a rebuilding of our trust, in God's goodness.
- At the risk of sounding canned, or hollow by saying this, I want to encourage you with what we're about to see in the pages of Holy Scripture.
- The only thing I would ask of you, is that you would prayerfully and carefully put aside some of your preconceived beliefs about suffering.

"We begin our [Christian] life believing our beliefs, we accept what we are taught without questioning; then when we come up against things we begin to be critical and we find that however right those beliefs are, they are not right for us because we have not bought them by suffering."

Oswald Chambers, "Baffled to Fight Better," p. 75

- I'm going to begin by presenting a number of questions with the hopes of pouring a foundation of sorts, upon which we can begin building.
- Absent these foundational principles, anything we build subsequently will not stand. When those storms of doubt come along it will fall down.
- Furthermore, if the foundation isn't right, then nothing else will fit right. So too, if we don't get these questions right, then no answer will fit right.

- Question #1: Why is there suffering in the first place? Because of sin, and God had to allow sin to its end, or He wouldn't be love or loved.
- If God would have just immediately eliminated Lucifer and a third of the angels, then all of His created beings would be forced to fear Him.
- Also, just as sin entered heaven vis-a-vis Lucifer, so too did sin enter earth vis-a-vis Adam without whom we wouldn't have the second Adam.

Romans 5:12-15 NIV Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned— (13) for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. (14) Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come. (15) But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!

- Question #2: Why does God allow believers to suffer so much? This particular question is wrong, thus you cannot have a right answer for it.
- I would suggest that the question should be; "what does God want to do by allowing believers to suffer so much?" It's not "why" it's "what."
- We'll round a corner shortly, and in so doing reveal many of those "what's" related to God allowing His people to suffer so much in this world.

- Be that as it may, and suffice it to say, the Apostle Peter gives us an answer for now at least, by addressing the matter of what instead of why.
- In 1 Peter 4:12-13, we can see how Peter by the Holy Spirit, exhorts us to not be surprised by the "why" because of the revealed in the "what."
- While verse 12 is riddled with the "why" Christian's suffer, in verse 13, Peter ever so beautifully writes that the answer is found in the "what."

1 Peter 4:12-13 NIV Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. (13) But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

- Question #3: Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Again, the question is not right, and cannot have a right answer.
- Rather, it should be asked; "why does God allow good things to happen to bad people." because none of us are good, only Jesus Christ was.
- For lack of a better way of saying it, this is a "game changer" in the sense that it changes the whole complexion of understanding suffering.

Romans 3:10-12 NIV As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; (11) there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. (12) All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

James 1:12-17 NIV Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (13) When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; (14) but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. (15) Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (16) Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. (17) Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

- Question #4: If God is in control, why doesn't He stop bad things from happening? The short answer to this is, because God is sovereign.
- Another way to say it, and see it, is that while God hates tragedy and suffering, He may choose not to stop it simply because He alone is God.
- Knowing that this may sound both brutal and blunt, God is god, and we are not, and God does not owe us an explanation for our suffering.

"It is in such a book of Job that many suffering souls will find consolation and sustaining, and this because no attempt is made to explain the why of suffering, but rather as expression is given to suffering which leaves one with the inspiration of an explanation in the final issue. The problem in connection with suffering arises from the fact that there is seemingly no explanation of it. ...There are things in our heavenly Father's dealings with us which have no immediate explanation. There are inexplicable providences which test us to the limit and prove that rationalism is a mere mental pose. The Bible and our common sense agree that the basis of human life is tragic, not rational, and the whole problem is focused for us in the book of Job."

Oswald Chambers, "Baffled to Fight Better," pp. 14, 17

Isaiah 45:5-7 NIV I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, (6) so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. (7) I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

Ecclesiastes 7:14-15 NKJV (14) In the day of prosperity be joyful, But in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, So that man can find out nothing *that will come* after him. (15) I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just *man* who perishes in his righteousness, And there is a wicked *man* who prolongs *life* in his wickedness.

Deuteronomy 29:29 NKJV "The secret *things belong* to the LORD our God, but those *things which are* revealed *belong* to us and to our children forever, that *we* may do all the words of this law.

- You'll notice that there were four questions and that they were all foundational "why" questions. I see all four of them as the four cornerstones.
- This will enable us to now build upon this as we sort of round a corner and start some of the framework with the "what" of Christian suffering.
- What we'll do in part two is frame it, a little bit differently by virtue of "what" God is doing in our lives by allowing us to experience suffering.

Matthew 7:24-27 NIV "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (25) The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. (26) But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. (27) The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."